

Soldier Hollow makes debut as venue

Ski event at the Olympic course starts Saturday

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Competitors, crowds and celebrations are part of the plans as Soldier Hollow has its coming-out party this month as an Olympic venue.

The site of the cross-country and biathlon events for the 2002 Winter Olympics welcomes its inaugural test event — the Chevy Truck U.S. Cross Country Championships, which start Saturday and run through Jan. 15.

More than 100 of the top cross-country skiers in the United States will take part in the weeklong series of events and races at the Olympic course, located at Wasatch Mountain State Park near Midway. The site is located in the southwest corner of Heber Valley, west of the north end of Deer Creek Reservoir.

"It is amazing what has happened to a cow pasture," said Taylor Robbins, who serves as chief of press for the nationals.

The Soldier Hollow venue features a 15-kilometer main track — one that Robbins says the International Ski Federation has labeled as the greatest course on Earth. That course has cutoffs that can result in courses in lengths of 1.5, 2.5, 5, 7.5, 10 and 12.5 kilometers.

Add in two separate biathlon loops of 4 kilometers each, and Soldier Hollow boasts nearly 24 kilometers of trails — and extensive, state-of-the-art snowmaking equipment all along the course. The courses meet all Olympic certification standards, which means they not only have sufficient vertical variations but are also challenging and technically sound.

While all the Olympic courses and snowmaking systems are in place, total construction at the venue is not yet complete. For example, a 7,000-square-foot timing house — to be built at the finish lines of the cross-country and biathlon courses — is expected to be finished this spring, with a trailer serving as a temporary timing house for the nationals.

Also, much of the course was seeded this fall, but the seeding hasn't had time to take quite yet, so warmer and drier weeks of weather this winter resulted in

some rather muddy conditions.

However, ongoing snowmaking, cooler temperatures and the recent snowstorms to hit the Wasatch Front have blanketed the course with more than adequate snow depths.

Events will feature participants in junior (up to 20 years of age), senior and masters (40 and older) divisions. Winners will be named in the three divisions, as well as in overall competition and in "guest" competition. A number of foreign guest skiers — from Canada and several European countries — are expected to participate in the national event. Kicking off the competition Saturday morning are the U.S. National Sprint qualification races, with sprint heats and finals scheduled for 1 p.m.

Monday's events are the classical races, with the women's 15-kilometer event starting at 9:30 a.m. and the men's 30K following at noon.

Free technique events are set for Wednesday, with the men's 10K free at 9:30 a.m. and the women's 5K free at 11:30 a.m.

Thursday features the pursuit classical technique races, with the women's 10K event at 10 a.m. and the men's 15K at 11:30 p.m.

The competition concludes Saturday, Jan. 15, with the distance events and mass starts for both. The men's 50-kilometer free begins at 10 a.m., with the women's 30K free starting 10 minutes later.

Event organizers are planning to use Jan. 15 closing ceremonies that follow the day's two featured races as a grand opening for the venue and a thank-you celebration to the athletes and community. The celebration will feature sky divers, mounted cowboys and a 150-voice children's choir and is scheduled to take place at the course at approximately 12:45 p.m.

Just as with all the race events during the U.S. Cross Country Championships, the celebration is free and open to the public. The University of Utah got a head start of sorts using the Soldier Hollow site, with the U. hosting the Western Regional Invitational races Wednesday and Thursday. Not only a collegiate prelude to the national championships, the U. Invitational is also a precursor to the NCAA Cross Country Championships that are scheduled for Soldier Hollow in mid-March.

The venue is also hosting the U.S. Biathlon Championships next month.

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